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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002498

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TAGS: PREL MOPS KWBG IS
SUBJECT: GOI/IDF ADDRESS SOLDIER INSUBORDINATION

Classified By: A/DCM Marc Sievers, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Israel Defense Force (IDF) and GOI responded quickly to yet another soldiers' demonstration on November 16 protesting against outpost evacuations in the West Bank. Israeli media outlets report that the IDF may examine further the "hesder" program combining yeshiva religious studies and military service, suggesting that IDF soldiers may have been encouraged by their rabbis to demonstrate. Public reaction to the demonstration crosses the spectrum -- from concern over the growing influence of religion and the IDF's potential politicization, to support for the soldiers' insubordination. End summary.

Another Soldier Demonstration

¶2. (SBU) On November 16, six soldiers from the Kfir Brigade's Nahshon Battalion protested against outpost evacuations by waving a banner from a building rooftop on their base stating "Nahshon does not expel either." The soldiers' demonstration took place shortly after the Border Police razed two illegal homes in the Negohot outpost in the southern Hebron hills. Two of the protesting soldiers hail from settlements, and serve in the IDF via the "hesder" program, which combines yeshiva religious studies and military service.

¶3. (SBU) As the IDF's largest brigade, the Kfir Brigade is permanently deployed in the West Bank. In October 2009, two soldiers from Kfir's Shimshon Battalion displayed a protest banner during their swearing-in ceremony at Jerusalem's Western Wall. The banner stated that "Shimshon does not evacuate Homesh," a reference to the northern Samaria settlement evacuated during the 2005 disengagement. The two Shimshon soldiers were expelled from the brigade and sentenced to 20 days in military prison. In August 2007, 12 soldiers from the Kfir Brigade's Duchifat Battalion refused to provide perimeter security during the planned evacuation of a home in Hebron overtaken by settlers.

Swift IDF/GOI Response

¶4. (SBU) The IDF reacted swiftly to the Nahshon demonstration; on November 16, two of the soldiers were sentenced to 30 days in military prison, dismissed from the unit, and demoted from the rank of sergeant to corporal. On November 17, the remaining four soldiers were tried: one soldier was sentenced to 21 days in the stockade and denied any command position; a second was sentenced to 14 days in military prison, while the last two soldiers were confined to their base for four weeks.

¶5. (SBU) Israeli media widely reported that the IDF high command issued strong messages to the Nahshon soldiers' rabbis. According to mainstream Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, IDF officers made known that the IDF will boycott yeshivas that support "rebels" in uniform. Israel Radio quoted high-ranking officers stating that the IDF would cease its arrangement with hesder yeshivas combining religious studies and military service -- and their pupils would be

drafted into regular military service -- if it became clear that hesder yeshiva rabbis had encouraged soldiers to disobey orders.

16. (SBU) IDF Spokesman Brigadier General Avi Benayahu said the recent demonstrations by Kfir soldiers should not be seen as a "political torrent." He cautioned against the notion that the IDF was "losing all control," noting that the military had managed similar cases in the past from all sides of the political spectrum -- and that ultimately, "common sense had prevailed." BG Benayahu acknowledged that several IDF officers had called for a wider examination of the hesder yeshivas' relationship with the IDF -- but no decision has been made on the subject.

17. (SBU) During a visit to a military base in Haifa on November 17, PM Netanyahu noted that Israel's security and existence are dependent upon the IDF. He said "there is no place for disobedience," and that the GOI will "employ a method to eradicate it." IDF Chief of General Staff LTG Ashkenazi also noted that the IDF is dealing with the demonstrations "with a firm hand."

Others Weigh In

18. (U) Yedioth Ahronoth's military analyst Alex Fishman examined the implications of the soldiers' demonstrations in a November 17 column, alleging there is "political mutiny in the air," and arguing that a "few days in the stockade" as punishment indicates there is "no law, no judge and nobody enforces any law in the territories." He speculates that

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army protests today will be "expressed in acts tomorrow," and that LTG Ashkenazi must "put an end to this, even in a brutal fashion" to prevent the politicization of the IDF.

19. (U) Elazar Stern, a major general in the reserves who has served as the director of the IDF's Human Resources Branch, stressed in a November 17 Yedioth Ahronoth op-ed the importance of responding firmly to the demonstration, especially as these soldiers "enjoy a support system" for their actions. He noted that there are many religious soldiers in the IDF, the absolute majority of whom understand the military's responsibilities in a democratic society. It is these "mature" soldiers who will "pay the price" for such demonstrations, Stern said.

10. (SBU) According to Israeli press reports, lawmakers from PM Netanyahu's Likud Party and the right-wing National Union are in the process of proposing a bill preventing the IDF from forcing soldiers to evacuate West Bank settlements against their will. The bill was drafted by Members of the Knesset (MKs) Tzipi Hotovely and Aryeh Eldad; 15 MKs from both the government coalition and the opposition have indicated their support for the bill -- but it is highly unlikely to go very far in the Knesset.

11. (U) Rabbi Elyakim Levanon, the principal of the hesder yeshiva where the two Nahshon soldiers studied, supported the demonstration, saying "the step the soldiers took is a step that every soldier takes when an attempt is made to coerce him, contrary to his faith, and drag him into politics." Independent mainstream Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv reported November 17 that several right wing organizations -- including the Task Force for the People and the Land -- have offered the Nahshon soldiers NIS 1,100 for every day spent in military prison.

COMMENT

12. (C) The recent spate of demonstrations by IDF soldiers protesting against outpost evacuations highlights the growing influence of religion in the IDF -- and the potential for

politicization. IDF sources have expressed concern to emboffs regarding the rising number of IDF officers who hail from settlements. Already this week, the IDF faced alleged statements made by the IDF's chief rabbi Brigadier General Avichai Rontzki at a hesder yeshiva in the West Bank that soldiers who "show mercy" to the enemy in wartime will be "damned"; BG Rontzki claimed his comments were taken out of context. These demonstrations may signal a shift in right-wing activity from attacks on Palestinians to protests in the IDF ranks. The rapid and vocal response by the IDF and GOI suggest the demonstrations are being taken seriously; IDF CHOD LTG Ashkenazi values discipline and has no patience for insubordination.

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